

# Shifting Gender Roles

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## Teacher Introduction:

Antebellum America was largely divided, with the North primarily a manufacturing hub and the South almost completely devoted to agriculture. This meant that as the war started, the North had to grow more of its own food while the South suddenly had to quickly diversify. This was especially important, since Southern ports were quickly blockaded by Northern ships, making trade with foreign nations impossible. At the start of the war, the Union's undeveloped land was put to use through agriculture. The Homestead Act, passed in 1862, provided free land to anyone willing to cultivate it. Virgin soil and excellent weather produced a surplus of goods that were sold to Europe for additional funds for the war effort.

The Northern states also had a complex economy that was based on multiple industries including farming, manufacturing, and shipping. The North, when compared to the South, was an urbanized place that had an emerging middle class, which gave more possibility for upward mobility than the stratified South. The social strata in the North also contained an immigrant population that by this time was coming into the United States in waves. Urbanization necessitated a different life, and it was not uncommon for men, and sometimes women, to work outside of the domestic sphere. During the Civil War, production was an important part of the war effort and factories had to continue to churn out goods. Though some men helped the war effort by remaining in their jobs, many women also came out of the domestic sphere to occupy jobs that had previously been taken by men, which was essential to production in the North.

Wartime affected the South differently, however. The South faced poor infrastructure, and their lack of transportation, to move what little they did have, made life hard for many Southern families. Food prices soared, and many families were encouraged by the Confederate government to plant foodstuff in their farms rather than tobacco and cotton.

Also, while it is true that the sexes, as well as the races, were extremely segregated in the antebellum world, this was especially prominent in the Southern states. There was a clear hierarchy in the South, with the white male at the head, his wife and children below him, his hired help below them, and the freeman and slave at the very bottom. Each plantation home was its own community. Unlike the North, where society was a bit more integrated, each Southern white man was his own king in the community he created for himself, and each member of the Southern community had a prescribed role that was executed without much crossover. White women did not work outside the home and largely existed in the domestic sphere.

However, wartime required many men to be away from their homes and regular jobs, and because slavery had propped up the economy of the South creating a large African American workforce, potentially all white men of a certain age were available to fight. When they left home, this created a world of mostly white women, children, and slaves. At this time, white women were educated in the knowledge that they were inferior to white men, and, therefore, believed that they did not have the strength necessary to control a large slave population or run a farm. Some women rose to this challenge while many found it arduous and troublesome and could not cope with new responsibilities. Nevertheless, with women performing roles in their homes and in society that had previously only been done by men, one can see how gender roles that had once felt set in stone were now being tested and blurred through wartime necessity.

### **A Teacher's Note on this Lesson:**

This lesson hopes to encourage students to look at this time through the standards of the period and to understand the revolution in family/gender roles that took place during the Civil War.

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### **Social Studies Georgia Standards of Excellence:**

Grade 8: **SS8H5** Analyze the impact of the Civil War on Georgia.

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH1** – Cite Specific Textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH2** – Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH8** – Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g. loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts.)

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH8** – Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

Grade 9: **SSUSH9** Evaluate key events, issues, and individuals related to the Civil War.

### **Lesson Objectives:**

- Explore the fluid nature of gender roles that made daily life work during the Civil War.
- Understand the different stresses and sacrifices endured by Confederate and Union families.
- Explore items used by men and women during the Civil War.
- Analyze the portrayal of women during the Civil War.

**Lesson Duration** -- One class period or one hour. *This can be modified to fit your class period length or divided across class periods or days.*

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**Lesson:**

*Begin the lesson by summarizing the information related in the teacher introduction above. Present it in whatever way is most comfortable for you and works best for your students.*

1. Explain the concept of **gender roles**, which were the roles prescribed to a certain gender based on their perceived abilities and societal constraints. Emphasize the fact that gender roles have changed over time. How were gender roles different in the North vs. South?
    - (a) What gender roles are prevalent today? What are societies' rules about roles for men and women? Encourage students to think about their parents or other adults in their lives to promote discussion.
  2. Gendered Objects: Read through the list of gendered objects provided below. Ask your students their thoughts on these objects, and the nature in which the objects' uses changed from before the war to after.
  3. Photo exercise: This can be done as a whole class, small group, or individually. Show the class six photos of women who represent different aspects of the female experience during the Civil War. Use the questions below to promote discussion:
    - A. Describe the woman in the photograph.
    - B. Using clues in the photo, what do you think her life was like?
    - C. Now read the description of this woman. Were your inferences correct?
    - D. Knowing what you do now about her life, do you notice anything you didn't before?
    - E. How do you think gender roles were changed or enforced in this photograph?
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## Gendered Objects:

- **Seeds** – This is an object that is usually associated with male occupations. Though men did most of the planting and harvesting women also participated as well. In poorer families that could not afford slave labor, women were expected to be in the fields alongside their husbands, often with their children, to get the harvest in. Vegetable gardens were often considered to be in the domestic arena and were often maintained by females. In addition, slave field hands were often women. Slave women did not enjoy the gender distinctions and protections that came with these distinctions that their white sisters did.
- **Cotton** – The same nuances that farming equipment requires, so does cotton. Though this cash crop is more firmly in the hands of male work, poorer women and female slaves would play a part in harvesting this as well.
- **Whip** – This was a device used for punishment in the South. Before the war, an overseer, usually a white male, was designated to keep the slave population of a given farm productive and under check. When white males were drafted, white females became in charge of the slave population. Many females did not feel up to the task of using this device to discipline their slave population. Others felt comfortable using it, however.
- **Iron Shackles** – Shackles were used to contain both male and female slaves. They could be used as a containment mechanism or as a punishment for perceived wrongdoing. This is a gender neutral piece.
- **Housewife** – This is the name for a small sewing kit, usually made by the female relations of a soldier, and used by the soldier to repair his clothes. Before the war, sewing and mending was strictly a female occupation. Many women continued to make clothing for their loved ones at the front, but often could not continue to mend the clothing while the war was going on. The housewife represents female occupation that crossed over, and is now an acceptable job for a male. The name “housewife” does place femininity into an object form, but the object was solely used by men. It is a highly charged gendered object.
- **Darning egg** – This is a darning tool that was used by women before the war. Just like the housewife, this piece changes gender roles as the war continued. Though they were still used at home by women, a soldier might have a darning egg to repair his holey socks.

- **Shuttle** – Weaving has been considered a female occupation for hundreds of years. In the North, factories full of women continued to weave throughout the war. This piece was primarily a lower-class female tool before the war, but due to the blockade of Southern ports, the influx of fabrics quickly dried out. Homespun, or cloth made on the southern farm or plantation, was already used in the past to construct the clothing for slaves and the very poor. This clothing was often spun and woven by a skilled female slave. Due to the lack of fashionable fabrics though, many white women of all classes took to wearing homespun, and a few wove the fabric themselves.
- **Cast Iron Skillet** – This object was used almost exclusively by women for cooking before the war. In richer homes, it was used by a servant or slave, and in homes that could not afford a cook, it was used by the woman of the house or her daughters. Though women continued to cook throughout the Civil War, soldiers often had to cook their own food as well. Both Union and Confederate troops were given rations of food and were expected to make dishes out of these goods. Though many men would not have something as nice as a frying pan, this represents the cooking these soldiers would have to do on their own during the war.
- **Trousers** – Pants are largely a male gendered object at this time, but during the war, many women were tempted to wear trousers as they went about the heavy lifting that comes with farm work. Sarah Morgan of Louisiana stated to her diary in the summer of 1862 that she almost put on her absent brother's pants. "I advanced so far as to lay it on the bed...my courage deserted me, and there ended my first and last attempt at disguise. I have heard of so many girls boast of having worn men's clothes; I wonder where they get the courage." – *Sarah Morgan: The Civil War Diary of a Southern Woman (Book 2, pg. 167)*. Many women did alter their clothing, even if they didn't go to the extreme of wearing men's clothing, by forgoing the large cage crinoline or hoops that were in fashion. It was much easier to go about chores without the large hoop holding them back. Some women even disguised themselves as men to fight in the war.
- **Farmer's Almanac** - A farmer's almanac, "by definition, records and predicts astronomical events, tides, weather, and other phenomena with respect to time." (Almanac.com) Tending to the farm and ruling over the slaves in the field was predominantly a man's job before the Civil War, but since many men had to leave their farms to fight, women took over their role. The Farmer's Almanac would be used to help predict the weather for the farm, and is a representation of tending to the fields.

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FILLING CARTRIDGES AT THE UNITED STATES ARSENAL AT WATERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS.—(See next page.)

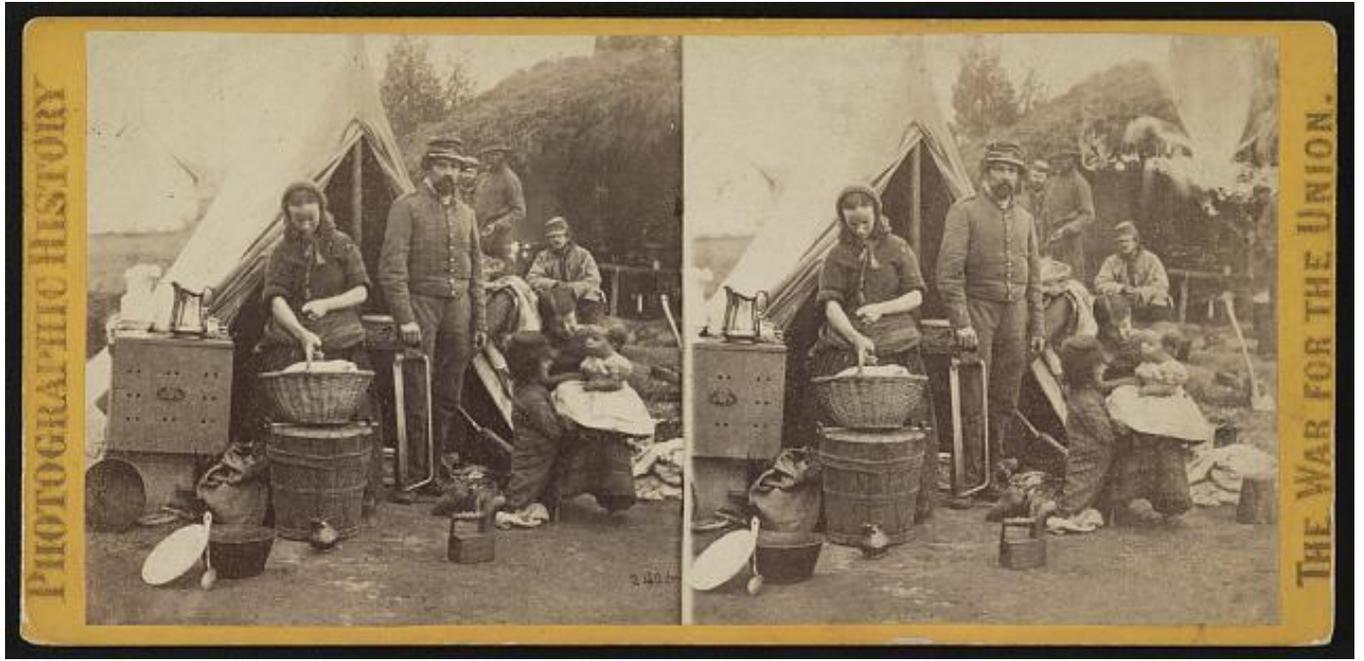
A.



**B.**



c.



D.



E.



F.



G.

## Women of the Civil War: Photo Exercise Handout/Key:

- A. This Harper's Weekly Magazine illustration shows women working outside of the home, replacing a job that had formerly only been performed by men. Many women worked outside of the home for the first time during this period. Working outside of the home was mostly an accepted practice in the north, but in the south traditional "women's" positions in the north, like teaching and nursing, were still performed by men. During the war, many of those things changed, and after the war, women who had grown during the time would demand more liberties, including the right to vote.
- B. This is a photo of Kady Brownell, who was one of 250 women to fight in the Civil War. Unlike many women who disguised themselves as soldiers, Ms. Brownell did not disguise the fact that she was a woman and served under her own name. She and her husband were part of the Fifth Rhode Island Infantry. Throughout the war, she was a sharpshooter, a regiment flag carrier, and a nurse. She retired from military service when her husband was wounded. Ms. Brownell shows the shifting perceptions of women during this period. After the war, women who worked outside the home and housewives, all of whom had been forced to take on more responsibility, were not able to return to antebellum gender distinctions.
- C. This is a photo of Clara Barton, who was known as the "angel of the battlefield." Ms. Barton began to participate in the war effort by collecting bandages, food, and clothing from Ladies Aid Societies. She transported these goods to the front lines to provide relief for soldiers. Clara Barton also worked on the front lines as a nurse and would be put in charge of several Union hospitals. After the war, she did not quietly go back to the domestic sphere, but instead lectured around the country about her experience during the war. Her humanitarian influences would found the American Red Cross in 1881.
- D. This stereograph card is entitled "Tent Life of the 31 Pennsylvania Regiment." Stereograph cards were cards that appeared as 3-D images when viewed through a device. These cards were popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which means that this was an image of interest to Civil War contemporaries. The card depicts a woman holding a basket with a man next to her holding a saw. A girl and two young children are shown to the right of the man. Some women refused to be separated from their husbands and traveled with the army, keeping house, or tent, for their soldier husband. In this instance, traditional gender roles were preserved with the woman tending to the needs of her family and dwelling while her husband concentrated on soldiering.
- E. Mary Tippee was with the 114<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Zouave regiment. Zouaves were both Union and Confederate regiments who adopted the North African style of dress that usually consisted of short open jackets, baggy trousers called sarouels, sashes, and oriental headgear.

Mary was a vivandiere, a role that meant she was a nurse, cook, seamstress, and laundress who was part of the Zouave regiment. Mary went beyond the usual vivandere role. These women were usually sent away from the battlefield, but she fought in thirteen separate battles. She was wounded in the ankle by a bullet at the battle of Fredericksburg and received the Kearny Cross for gallantry – it is visible in this photo. Mary is also considered to be the only woman who fought in the battle of Gettysburg. She used the canteen pictured to take water and spirits to the men in the field. In this photo she wears the Zouave uniform with a calf-length skirt over her trousers.

- F. This ambrotype depicts Lucretia Electa and Louise Ellen Crossett, sisters who worked at a Lawrence, Massachusetts mill. The two sisters are wearing identical outfits, down to their jewelry. They both have weaving shuttles, and Lucretia carries scissors on her skirt. These tools show that these were two working women who were proud of their employment. This photo was taken September 26, 1859, before the Civil War. It was the presence of factories, like the one that the Crossett sisters worked in, that would set the North apart from the South during the great war.
- G. This illustration is entitled “Our Watering Places – The Empty Sleeve at Newport,” by Winslow Homer. It was originally pictured in Harper’s Weekly Magazine in 1865. A stylish young woman drives a phaeton (type of carriage) next to a veteran with a missing arm. Due to his injury and the tides of war, she is the one in charge while he is the dependent one. The gender roles have surely switched in this illustration.